

The Washington Post

Montgomery officials seek broader whistleblower protections

By Michael Laris
Washington Post Staff Writer
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In a bid to shake loose information about potential waste or fraud, Montgomery County officials proposed broadening whistleblower protections Tuesday for the thousands of employees who work for county contractors.

Montgomery's procurement office awarded contracts worth \$899 million last year for everything from office supplies and services for the poor to medical-waste disposal and storm-drain maintenance. But although county employees who report improprieties are protected from losing their jobs or other retaliation, the rules meant to protect employees of contractors are currently drawn much more narrowly.

"It's taxpayer money, one way or another," said council member Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring), who sponsored a bill that would protect outside employees who inform county officials about "an abuse of authority, gross mismanagement, or gross waste of money." It would cover employees of contractors and sub-contractors.

"We contract services with your county tax dollars. They should have the same rules and regulations as the county

government," Ervin said.

Ervin described a recent instance of alleged retaliation against a whistleblower who reported problems at her employer, a nonprofit group that contracts with the county. Ervin declined to name the group but said the whistleblower, who left her position, was forced out of her next job at another organization at the behest of her former boss. "People are afraid to come forward," Ervin said.

The proposed law might not have helped in that instance because the action was alleged to have been taken by another employer. But contractors found to have taken action against their staff could lose county business if the bill becomes law. The county could end or suspend all or part of particular contracts or "declare

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a contractor or subcontractor ineligible for further county contracts," according to a draft of the legislation, which was sponsored by six of the council's nine members. A hearing is scheduled for next month.

Council member George Leventhal (D-At Large), who was not a co-sponsor, said he does not know what prompted the bill or what problem would be solved, and he wants more information.

"I think it's probably a good thing. The possibility that there is contractor fraud or improper billing does exist," Leventhal said. "Under those circumstances, we certainly want to learn about that and correct it. And if the way we learn about that is through an employee, the employee ought to be protected."

David E. Dise, director of Montgomery's Department of General Services, which oversees the county's procurement, said he wants employees inside and outside the county to feel comfortable coming forward. "If there's misconduct or other abuse or fraud taking place on a Montgomery County contract," Dise said, he wants to know about it. And if adding such a protection for whistleblowers makes them feel less intimidated, "then I certainly am in favor of it."

The legislation would also try to strengthen protections for contractor and

county employees who help Montgomery's inspector general, Thomas Dagley. County officials said the goal was to try to increase cooperation more broadly. Beyond protection for providing information, "cooperating with, or in any way assisting" the inspector general's office would also be covered.

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